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INDEPENDENT E-LEARNING OFFERS IN TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY. IN SEARCH OF A MAP AND POSSIBLE QUALITY INDICATORS

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ABSTRACT

Elearning offers in the tourism and hospitality sector have been investigated, recently and four main types of courses have been identified, according to their provider: Academic, Destination Management Organizations, Corporate, and Independent. While for other types several studies are available, there is a lack of research when it comes to the online independent courses. This study focuses on e-learning courses issued by independent providers: they include training offers of

very different nature, e.g.: language trainings for waiters, food and wine matching courses, sustainability communication training, cooking for celiac people, etc. The results of this exploratory study provide an initial map of such educational offers; it discusses also some inferential indicators of satisfaction expressed by the users on social media, which may provide useful insights for the identification of possible quality indicators of tourism-related online independent courses.

KEYWORDS

E-Learning, Tourism, Hospitality, Quality Indicators, Social Learning.

INTRODUCTION

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have become important tools for all players involved in the tourism and hospitality sector, in particular for supporting promotional strategies and efficiency in the management of products and services. Moreover, tourism players found it to be critical for their managerial performances to remain up to date on the opportunities offered by ICTs (Adukaite et al., 2013). In this context, tourism-related training offers took advantage of the use of ICTs, as they allow a greater audience to be reached, possibly reducing costs, and enhancing lifelong learning processes for employees in the sector, generating a large new e-learning market in the tourism and hospitality field (Cantoni et al., 2009).

Main types of e-learning providers have been identified (Cantoni et al., 2009), classified into four main groups: a) Online Academic Courses, b) Online Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) Courses, c) Online Corporate Courses, d) Online Independent Courses. While the first three groups have already been studied, little attention has been paid to the *Online Independent Courses* group.

When it comes to the quality evaluation of an online course, academic and corporate training courses have usually established evaluation processes in terms of effectiveness, efficiency, and return on investment, thanks to institutionally approved quality standards. On the other hand, DMOs and related independent courses do not have such a structured process for evaluating their quality. However, while the courses provided by DMOs have been extensively analyzed, including the viewpoint of feedback from the travel agents following them (Kalbaska et al., 2012; 2013), research on the Independent courses category is still lacking, and it should be further studied in order to identify possible quality indicators.

In this research context, it has been assumed that online conversations might be used as a first analysis layer for understanding possible quality indicators for an online course, similarly to what happens with online travel reviews that contain instances of evaluation of a tourism product or service (Marchiori & Cantoni, 2012).

This exploratory study therefore aims to map offers of Online Independent Courses and to identify possible quality indicators expressed by users in social media.

E-LEARNING PROVIDERS IN THE TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY FIELD

E-learning providers in the tourism and hospitality field have recently been explored by Cantoni et al. (2009), generating a map according to their providers. Four main e-learning providers emerged in the research:

- **Online Academic Courses:** corresponding “to all online training courses whose provider is an officially registered academic/educational establishment”.
- **Online Destination Management Organizations (DMOs):** courses, corresponding “to courses offered by destination management organizations (national, regional or local) to travel agents and travel operators, who sell the country (region, city, etc.) as a tourist destination”.
- **Online Corporate Courses:** “whose provider is a company or an institution working in the tourism field, and manages online training for its own employees as well as for travel agents who sell its products”.
- **Online Independent Courses:** “all the courses, whose provider is a third party other than an academic institution, a tourism enterprise, or a destination management organization. Nevertheless, the topics of the



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course lie within the tourism and hospitality industry”.

Whereas the first three categories (academic, DMOs and corporate) have received most of the attention from research community (Cantoni & Kalbaska, 2010; Collins et al., 2003; Kalbaska, 2012; Kuttainen & Lexhagen, 2012; Liburd & Christensen, 2012; Sigala, 2004), Online Independent Courses have not been investigated so far. Such courses should be interpreted within the broad framework of lifelong learning, which stresses the necessity for people living in the knowledge society to continuously learn and up-skill through different formal and informal strategies, many of them connected with ICTs (Longworth, 2013; De Pietro, 2011; De Pietro et al., 2013).

THE ROLE OF ONLINE CONVERSATIONS IN IDENTIFYING QUALITY INDICATORS OF A SERVICE

Indeed, quality is a complex construct (Barbera, 2004; De Pietro, 2012; Ehlers, 2004, 2009; Martínez-Argüelles et al, 2010). However, it is possible to define several levels of service quality: quality assurance, quality control, total quality management, while the identification of quality indicators generally require interviews and an in-depth analysis. This study explores a complementary approach, and investigates quality indicators from opinions expressed online (Wang, 2008; Zheng, 2009).

Online conversations might contain instances of an indirect evaluation of the offer of a tourism product or service (Marchiori & Cantoni, 2012) and might thus be used as a first layer of analysis in the understanding of possible quality criteria of an offer. Because of this, hotel and destination managers are paying more and more attention to them. These online conversations might also be considered

by e-learning providers, as future e-learning users could use them while taking the decision whether or not to attend a specific online training.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study focuses on online independent courses in order to draw an initial map of them and to identify possible quality indicators to fill the existing research gap. Accordingly, this research will answer the following research questions:

- What are the characteristics of the online independent courses related to tourism and hospitality in terms of price, geographical origin of providers, and topic offered?
- Can the contents of online conversations be used as inferential quality indicators for online independent courses?

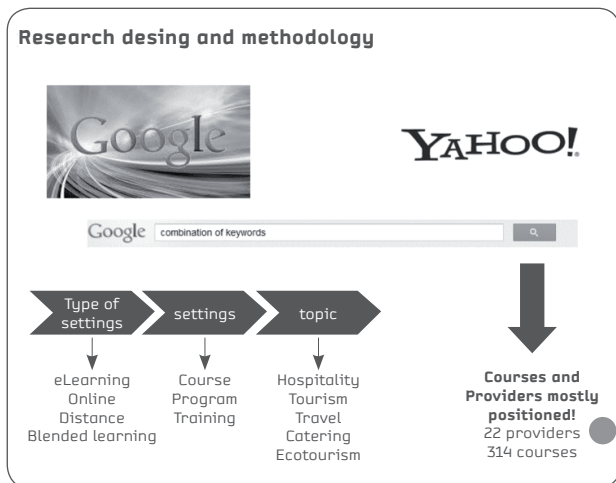
In order to answer the above questions, two steps have been taken within this research.

PHASE A: ANALYSIS OF INDEPENDENT HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM-RELATED E-LEARNING OFFERS

The methodology used to identify independent hospitality- and tourism-related e-learning courses reflected and continued previous work carried out by Cantoni et al. (2009). In particular, in order to address the first research question, a series of sixty keywords, related to topics about online training courses (Figure 1), was searched using the most popular search engines – Google and Bing – in June 2013, from Lugano (Switzerland).

The first three pages of the search engine results have been analyzed for every possible combination of the above keywords (4x3x5=60

Figure 1: Keyword selection schema

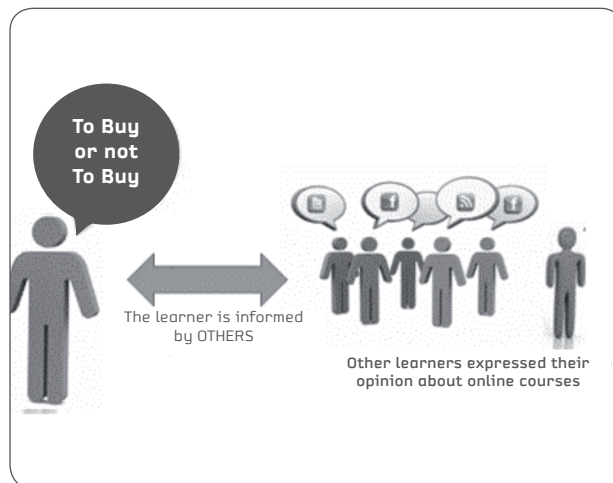


combinations). Among the results obtained, with a total of 1,800 URLs analyzed, 314 online training courses have been identified as belonging to the relevant category - Independent tourism-related e-learning courses. The courses analyzed were published by 22 providers. The following characteristics of courses and providers have been analyzed: topics of offered online training courses and their prices, as well as the location of the provider and its nature (i.e.: profit vs. non-profit).

PHASE B: ANALYSIS OF THE QUALITY INDICATORS IN SOCIAL MEDIA

An *ad-hoc* framework is proposed in order to answer the second research question, which assumes that learners themselves evaluate the quality of the online training courses they attended, and that such comments/opinions are published in social media. According to Kahn & Strong (1998), information quality is the characteristic of information to meet or exceed customer expectations; in this case, the second strategy is adopted: quality is measured as a match with actual users' expectations towards an object (Ehlers, 2009; Eppler, 2006; Gretzel

Figure 2: Framework for quality indicators in social media



et al, 2006; Hajraf & Salah, 2012; O'Reilly, 2005). Therefore, the proposed framework consists of the following elements (Figure 2):

- **Prospective learner** (receiver of the online message/s): an online user who is interested in signing up for/purchasing an online training course;
- **Senders of online message/s:** the learner is informed not only by the provider of the course, but also through information expressed online by those who have already attended such a course, or other courses from the same provider, through exposure to online conversations published on social media;
- **Message/s published online:** related to the online course concerned or its provider.

The prospective learner might decide whether or not to buy an online training course also considering comments found on social media, and can eventually further contribute to such conversations, publishing her/his own evaluation of it.

In this second step, the social media presence of the providers of independent online courses has been assessed. A search

was made for course providers on the main social media platforms – Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Google+. Subsequently, the research focused on the most active social media platform, which resulted to be Facebook. The first posts related to e-learning courses were analyzed in order to identify main topics covered, and related sentiments expressed (Inversini & Cantoni, 2009; Litivin, 2009; Marchiori & Cantoni, 2012). The analysis considered also the number of page likes, shares, pictures or videos posted, and profile updates within a period of one month (June, 2013).

RESULTS

The main results of the two phases of the research are presented below.

PHASE A. STRUCTURE OF INDEPENDENT HOSPITALITY- AND TOURISM-RELATED E-LEARNING OFFERS

In the first research phase, a series of dimensions were analyzed. As shown in Figure 3, among the 314 e-learning courses analyzed, the main topics covered are: hospitality-related e-learning courses, travel and tourism,

and catering, which together represent approximately 86% of the entire online educational offer considered. Other types of e-learning courses are: ecotourism, tour operator, tourism management, sales, and cabin crew.

Taking economic indicators into consideration, the price of the online training offers has been analyzed in order to determine the average cost. Results show that 44% of the providers display a price for the courses offered; 16% of the providers instead offer courses free of charge. For the remaining 40% of providers, the price was not indicated for the training courses offered and it was necessary to call the provider to find out.

The average prices of the courses for each category are shown in Figure 4 (prices are standardized in US dollars). Courses with no indication of their price and those that were free of charge were not considered for the analysis.

It appears that the most expensive courses do belong to the following categories: tourism management (\$529), and ecotourism (\$450). The cheapest ones belong to the categories hospitality (\$170) and catering (\$88).

Figure 3: Number of independent online courses by categories

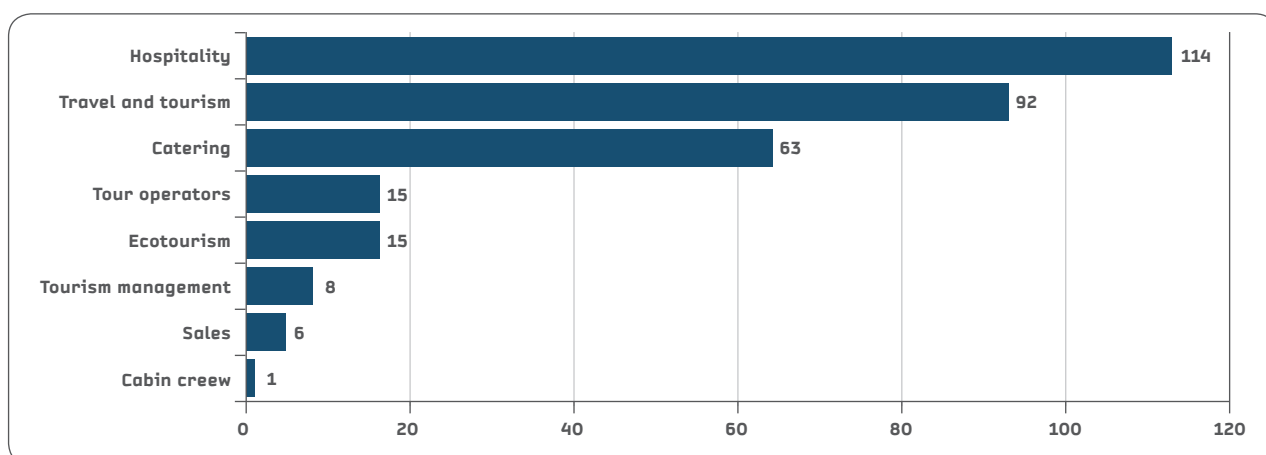


Figure 4: Average price of courses per categories

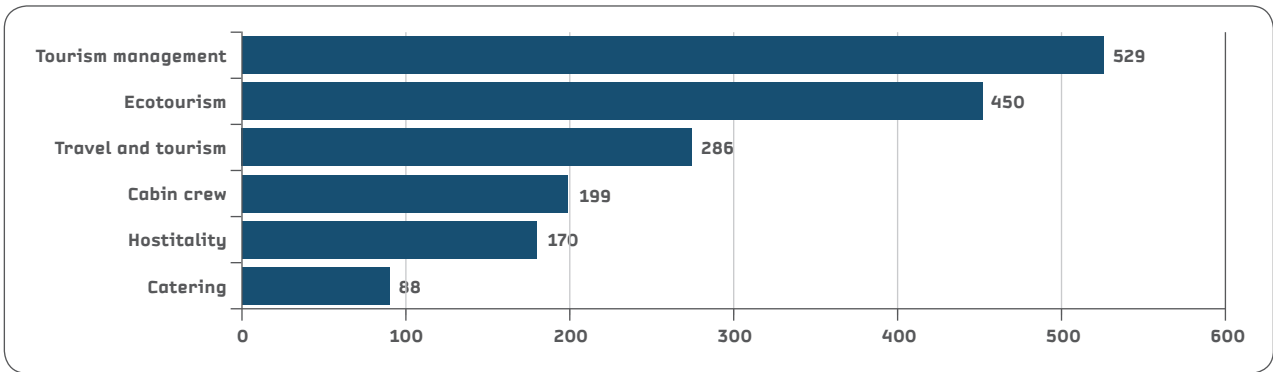


Figure 5: Number of providers per nation

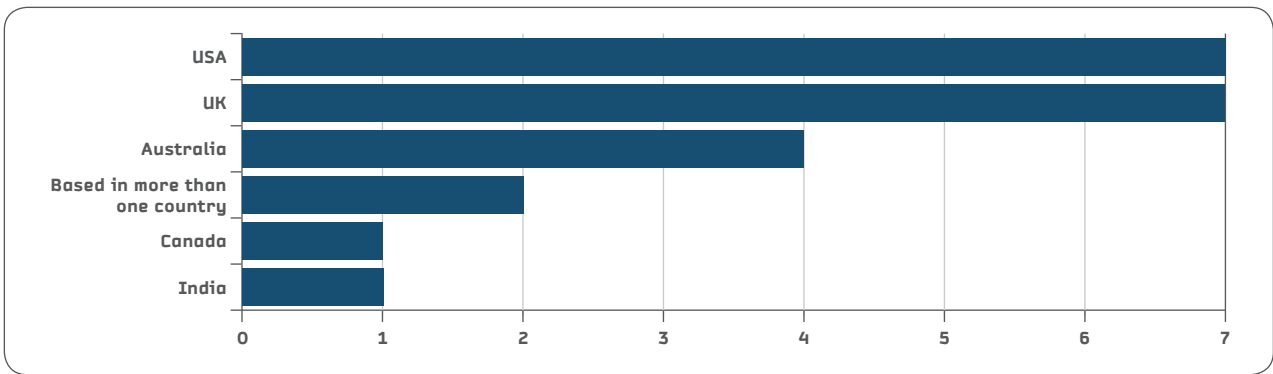
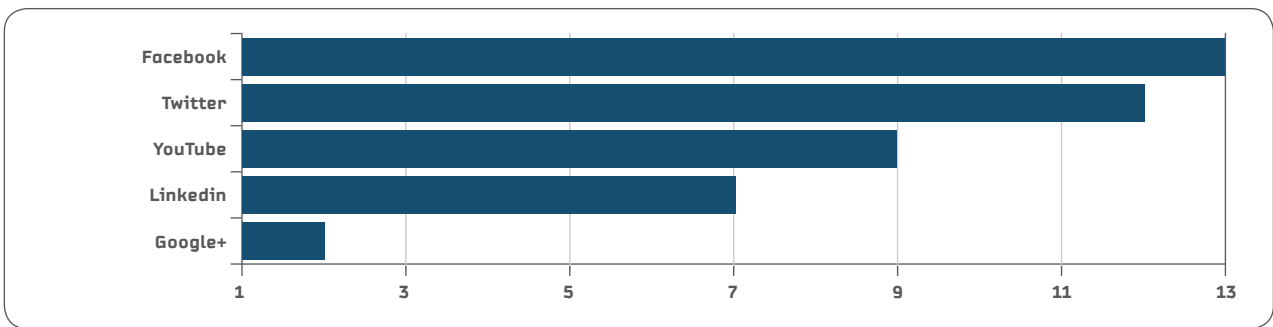


Figure 6: Social media presence of providers of independent e-learning courses



As for the type of organization, which provides online training activities, 64% of the studied providers are for-profit organizations, while 36% are for non-profit ones.

For the geographical origin of providers, their head office was considered, as indicated on the website (Figure 5).

As can be seen, the majority of providers are based in the US, UK, and Australia. However,

must be said that such a result greatly depends on the fact that the online search was done using English keywords.

PHASE B: ANALYSIS OF THE QUALITY INDICATORS IN SOCIAL MEDIA

To answer the second research question, first the social media presence of every provider has been analyzed (Figure 6).



As can be seen from the graph, it appears that social media platforms mostly used by providers studied were Facebook (13 providers) and Twitter (12). Only two providers have a page on Google+. Another interesting finding is the fact that only two providers were present in all the social media considered, while eight providers did not have any social media presence.

Due to this initial result, further analysis has considered the most used social medium: Facebook. According to the framework

described above, qualitative and quantitative analysis of the Facebook pages of providers was carried out, with the aim of identifying possible indicators of the quality of the courses they offer (Cox, 2013; Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2013).

The first step in the analysis was to identify a set of quantitative indicators for each Facebook profile relating to the number of likes, number of “talking about this”, number of videos and pictures posted, and the frequency of profile updates.

Table 1: Data on the Facebook presence of providers. Results ranked according to the number of Likes

E-LEARNING PROVIDER	COURSES OFFERED	N. OF LIKES (Facebook page)	N. OF VIDEOS	N. OF PHOTOS	FRESHNESS
Coeliac UK	catering	15303	11	154	yes
The International Ecotourism Society	ecotourism	15,017	0	185	yes
OTEN - Open Training and Education Network	hospitality /tourism management	11,591	1	194	yes
Sustainable Travel International	ecotourism	7,974	1	41	not
Online Courses Australia	hospitality /tourism management	5,367	0	28	yes
OTT - Online Travel Training	hospitality /tourism management/travel tourism/sales	4,864	1	983	yes
Mindleaders	hospitality	3,777	15	63	not
Training Course Professionals	hospitality	1,147	0	1251	not
oregonrta	hospitality /tourism management	543	0	70	not
Online Travel EDU	hospitality /tourism management/travel tourism	352	0	105	not
Career Quest Training Center	travel tourism	194	0	18	yes
etrainu	hospitality/catering	103	0	10	not
Cogentys	hospitality	30	0	16	not

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Data has been extracted on the same day by taking screenshots of the relevant pages, which were subsequently processed for further analysis. The criterion used to establish the degree of freshness of a Facebook profile was as follows: the profile is considered to be updated if the distance between two subsequent posts does not exceed seven days; the analysis considered the period from April to June 2013. Table 1 presents the results of this first quantitative analysis.

A certain positive correlation between the number of Likes and freshness of the Facebook profile can be noted, which suggests that regularly/frequently updating one's social media profiles can have a positive impact on the number of Likes.

Along with this first quantitative analysis, an in-depth analysis of the individual posts has been made, in order to identify the comments and opinions expressed by the users, while looking for possible quality indicators. In order to do so, ten most liked pictures for every profile were analyzed, as it has been noticed that the pictures posted online were the main elements that generate interactions with the users and therefore reach of instances of opinion towards the providers. Moreover, photos posted on the Facebook pages are generally archived in specific photo albums accessible to users and therefore visible at all times.

For every photo, the following sub-indicators were analyzed: topic of the photo, number of likes, number of shares, number of posts, number of comments, as well as an evaluation of whether the comments were positive or negative.

Results show that contents published on social media by the providers allowed learners to express their opinions on various elements concerning the tourism-related online educational range on offer both at the level of

providers and of individual teachers, tutors and other training staff.

In particular, the most popular providers on Facebook published posts with the following topics, generating mainly positive comments:

- The provider *Coeliac UK* (category Catering) reported positive opinions on the following elements: teachers, guest lectures and promotions.
- The provider *OTEN – Open Training and Education Network* (category Hospitality and Tourism Management) on: tourism destinations, cultural events, and books.
- The provider *The International Ecotourism Society* (category Ecotourism) on: educational tips, and successful stories from students.

For the following types of courses – hospitality, travel and tourism, tourism management) – the photos that generated more Likes were related to: team/staff, e-learning model/educational materials, promotion of the course, success stories of students, contest, conferences.

For the Catering category, the photos were about: food competition, charity event, guest lecturers; for the Ecotourism category, the photos were about: destinations covered by the courses, events, students' experience with the courses and books related to the courses.

Regarding the presence of negative comments, it has been noted that they were generally not related to the topic of the commented picture. For example, a picture about a tutor might host comments related to the usability of the e-learning offer.

The main negative discussions were about:

- The fact that online training courses were not always useful for finding further employment,



- Lack of support from tutors online,
- Lack of usability of the Learning Management System

Moreover, the presence of discussions with negative comments has been reported mainly for providers offering expensive, for-profit courses. Finally, an overall limited interaction/response to the comments by the providers of the online training activities has been noticed.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study contributes to the research on e-learning in tourism and hospitality, providing an initial map of the range of independent tourism-related e-learning courses. Hospitality, travel and tourism and catering are the main courses offered in this e-learning segment; and Facebook appeared to be the main social media platform used to interact with learners.

A bottom-up approach has been undertaken in order to identify possible quality indicators emerging from online conversations. In this approach, considerable attention is given to the learners within the online training environment, where users become the focus of the entire educational range in a training context that increasingly integrates formal criteria into the informal training context.

The initial hypothesis of considering a bottom-up approach for the identification of possible quality indicators within social media turned out to be promising. The results of this study show that, with the help of social media, learners express their opinions on various elements concerning the tourism-related online educational range both at the level of providers and individual teachers, tutors, usability of the e-learning offers, and usefulness of those online courses in terms of carrier possibilities. The analysis of online conversations generated

by the photos posted on Facebook pages by the e-learning providers, shows that learners tend to use those online spaces not only to comment the topic of the photos, but also to report their experience of the courses, and, in turn, of the providers.

The presence of negative comments among the messages posted online suggested the way social media pages are used by the users of independent e-learning courses for posting questions to providers, expressing doubts about the range and reporting complaints. Indeed, the presence of discussions with negative mentions suggests learners' needs to discuss and interact both with other learners and/or providers.

Future research should consider several limitations of this study: expanding the e-learning providers and analyzing all the posts, including posts with text, links or video. Moreover, other social media profiles (YouTube, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+) can be analyzed in order to evaluate whether the quality indicators identified are accordingly present on those social media websites.

Future studies might consider a comparison between providers for profit and not profit audiences, expensive and budget training offers, in order to clarify whether the quality expectation in the e-learning offer varies according to the economic expenditure for the courses.

Subsequently, possible web-based automatic tool for the analysis of online conversations about independent e-learning courses might be designed in order to allow users to easily benchmark existing online training courses and better evaluate their offers.

E-learning providers should take into account the analysis of the online conversations presented in their social media as they might

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contain instances of opinions regarding the quality of their offers. Therefore, e-learning providers might use the analysis of online conversations to learn about the learners' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the courses offered, complains, questions, suggestions for the improvement of the courses.

Finally, this study might be of interest for providers operating in the tourism and hospitality online training field, as it might help to identify some of the strengths and weaknesses of the online training offer, as well as helping in the review of their social media presence.

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